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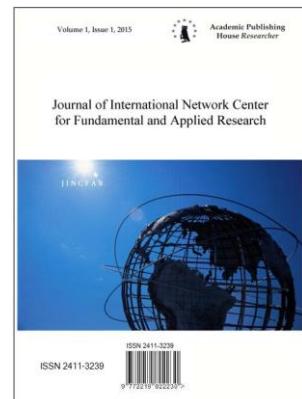
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The Soviet Art House Cinema about the War: Case Study

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Abstract

The Soviet art house film *Eastern Corridor* was largely based on the conquests of the best wartime movies. Like *Ivan's Childhood*, the visual language of the *Eastern Corridor* is distinguished by exquisite black and white graphics, imbued with a complex game with space and symbols. But this is the case when the cinematheque quotation (visual motifs of early films by Andrzej Wajda, Miklós Jancsó, Andrei Tarkovsky, military themes of the Czech "new wave" (... and *The Fifth Rider is Fear*, "*Wagon to Vienna*", "*Diamonds of the Night*"), black-and-white parables of Ingmar Bergman in the late 1950s – early 1960s, etc.) was organically included in the film, without damaging its existential meditation, philosophical and visual originality.

However, as a result, the film was not at all what the authorities expected it to be and was met with hostility not only by party officials, but also by quite liberal film critics.

In recent years, Russia has produced many films and serials about the war. And the authors of these movies, not feeling the censorship of pressure, reveal to us the dramatic pages of the "fateful forties"... But even against this background, seemingly forever forgotten and scolded, the *Eastern Corridor* today does not look outdated – neither in terms of film language nor in terms of problems. "Manuscripts", indeed, do not burn...

Keywords: USSR, Germany, film, cinema, art house, military topic, war, ideology, Eastern Corridor.

1. Introduction

The structure of ideological and obscene stereotypes of Soviet films on the war theme of the 1940s - 1960s was approximately as follows:

- historical period, place of action: any period of the war of 1941-1945, the USSR, Germany, and less often other countries;

- the situation, household items: military headquarters, equipment (tanks, planes, ships, trucks, etc.), front lines, trenches, dugouts of the Soviet military; modest dwellings and household items of peaceful Soviet inhabitants in occupation and behind, more comfortable dwellings, military equipment and household items of German and/or Western characters;

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- techniques for depicting reality: more or less realistic (more common for films shot since the second half of the 1950s) or grotesque images (a characteristic feature of many comedies shot in the 1940s and post-war Stalinist epics such as *The Fall of Berlin*) of people's lives during the war.

Most of the ordinary Soviet films on the war theme were built on simple dichotomies:

- 1) The hostile and aggressive imperialist "new order" of Nazi Germany and the peaceful, friendly Soviet system, the country of foremost manufacturers, athletes, happy children and cheerful builders of the light communist society;
- 2) Positive, ideologically correct (i.e. loyal to communist and patriotic ideas) characters and villains: the Nazis and their henchmen, with an ogre ideology of hatred for everything non-Aryan;
- 3) heroism/self-sacrifice and aggression/ betrayal;
- 4) honesty/honesty and deception/covarice;
- 5) plans (Soviet and Nazi) and results (defeat, although often delayed for the Nazis, victory, although often also delayed for Soviet characters);

Characters, their values, ideas, clothes, physique, vocabulary, facial expressions, gestures: positive characters: bearers of Soviet and communist ideas; negative characters: bearers of anti-human, Nazi and militaristic ideas. As a rule, characters are shared not only by their social status, but also by their material status. German characters (Nazis) are usually portrayed as rude and brutal, with a strong physique, harsh vocabulary, evil faces, active gestures and unpleasant laryngeal vocal timbres. They are dressed in military uniforms of the Wehrmacht and the SS, sometimes appear on the screen in their underwear (this is when they run out of a burning house or blown up dugout). Traitors/police reptiles are no better depicted than traitors/police who reptile to Nazi masters: disgusting, sometimes miserable appearance, cruelty, drunkenness, degenerate faces, nasty mimics, squealing voices, etc. They are dressed in stolen goods, often not in height...

The Soviet soldiers and officers are dressed, of course, poorer than the German ones on the screen: in battle/after the battle they are dressed in dirt and dust, in the hours of rest they try to look "by the book". At the same time, of course, there may be a situation when a Soviet soldier receives a reconnaissance mission: in this case, he changes clothes and looks indistinguishable from the Nazis. Soviet characters can be shown on the screen, both as pretty athletes and ordinary people. The main thing is that although they are cruel and irreconcilable to the enemy, but otherwise they are humane and responsive. Perhaps, from the point of view of literary canons, their vocabulary is not always correct, but they have good faces and looks and voices of a pleasant timbre. Soviet civilians are usually portrayed as victims of Nazi aggression, suffering from evil occupiers and helping Soviet soldiers and guerrillas. The home front workers, despite all everyday difficulties, do "everything for the fountain, everything for the victory";

A significant change in the lives of the characters: negative characters (Nazis, their accomplices) begin to implement their inhumane ideas (armed aggression, massacres of defenceless people, explosions, bombings, terrorist acts and other crimes);

The problem arose: the life of positive (Soviet) characters, as well as the life of an entire nation under threat.

Searching for a solution to the problem: armed struggle between positive characters and negative ones.

Solution of the problem: mass heroism of the Soviet people, destruction/arrest of negative characters (Nazis and their accomplices), victory of positive characters (intermediate or final), return to peaceful life.

The victory of the Soviet army over the Nazi was always presented on the screen not only as a victory of the great people defending their homeland from external aggression, but also as a victory of the only true communist ideology, the Soviet system over the Nazis / Fascists, imperialists, traitors, etc.

2. Materials and Methods

The research material is an Soviet film on the war topic: *Eastern Corridor* (1966), the excellent example of art house. The main method is a hermeneutic analysis (including ideological, identification, iconographic, plot and character analysis, etc., using the technologies developed by C. Bazalgette ([Bazalgette, 1995](#)), A. Silverblatt ([Silverblatt, 2001: 80-81](#)), W.J. Potter ([Potter, 2001](#)) and U. Eco ([Eco, 2005](#)). We have also analyzed film critics' response to this film.

3. Discussion

The *Eastern Corridor* was largely based on the conquests of the best wartime films. Like *Ivan's Childhood*, the visual language of the *Eastern Corridor* is distinguished by exquisite black and white graphics, imbued with a complex game with space and symbols. But this is the case when the cinematheque quotation (visual motifs of early films by Andrzej Wajda, Miklós Jancsó, Andrei Tarkovsky, military themes of the Czech "new wave" (... and *The Fifth Rider is Fear*, "Wagon to Vienna", "Diamonds of the Night), black-and-white parables of Ingmar Bergman in the late 1950s – early 1960s, etc.) was organically included in the film, without damaging its existential meditation, philosophical and visual originality.

However, as a result, the film was not at all what the authorities expected it to be and was met with hostility not only by party officials, but also by quite liberal film critics.

Here is how V. Vinogradov's film was evaluated, for example, in the article of 1968 written by T. Ivanova: "*The Eastern Corridor* belongs to the number of those films, after watching which it is necessary to look into the abstract: to understand the sequence of events, to simply understand what is going on. As if some simple picture was cut into many pieces, big and small, diligently mixed, shaken up – and a new bizarre puzzle pattern was laid out (curiously enough, that here T. Ivanova practically word for word anticipates the claims expressed in 1974 by critics of A. Tarkovsky's film *Mirror* – A.F.). This is the general compositional structure and the same solution, even a purely visual one, of each individual episode. The wooden hand, which is suffering from the above, is exposed from under the flowing mass of grain – it is a crucifixion, a cross with a broken bar; the bizarrely curved snag occupies the screen, is given in different angles, hypnotizes our imagination – it is the beginning of the scene on the river. Truly, it would be like a puzzle in a puzzle, a rebus in a puzzle. After all, and all this can, of course, be understood. But we can't avoid one question, it's a question about the inner obligation of such a form, about the artistic justification of the mixture of cruel naturalism and visual sophistication that reigns on the screen. ... There will be many other scenes, but in the first of them something very important for the overall atmosphere of the picture will be completely discovered. This is an abundance of cruel effects. It is the extravagance of the surroundings. It is a sophisticated skill of the operator. Taken together, this is the aestheticization of naturalism" ([Ivanova, 1968: 94](#)).

So it is only surprising that after two years on the shelf, the film *Eastern Corridor* is still in the so-called "limited distribution" of 1968...

Of course, the expressive, dreamlike style (torn editing with interrupted half-word dialogues and events in the spirit of the French nouvelle vague, deep compositions of the frame, nervous, abrupt movements of the camera, bizarre play of light, shadows and the whole range of shades of black and white) and the parable plot of Valentin Vinogradov's film today can be easily presented in an erratic manner of R. Volobuyev, who decided that *Eastern Corridor* is *Reservoir Dogs* about the Belarusian guerrillas, shot, apparently, under the impression of Bergman & French new wave at the same time and knows what else, with the music of M. Tariverdiev and completely crazy cameraman work. Heroes in the Nazi prison try to understand who gave them away through the system of flash backs (by the way, they don't understand them to the end). Everything is built on two equally stingy things: Christian symbols and such a cold, pathological, as if Bergman's eroticism. That is, the collaborator rapes a peasant girl in the elevator, and the elevator is a former church, and she painfully crawls on the grain to the crucifixion. The young Valentina Titova is going to be electrocuted by the ruthless Nazi jocks in her white shirts, they say: "Take off your clothes. ... There is also a daughter of a Jewish scientist who looks like a parody of Anna Karina (actress of many films of J.-L. Godard of the 1960s – A.F.) and walks through the concentration camp in a short black dress and high heels. Concentration camp in general is rather a metaphorical thing – people come there, go away, everything is almost on a voluntary basis. And also – only Nazis sit in the film. Heroes either stand, casting shadows, or lie with broken legs. If the hero sits down, it is almost a transition to the dark side. In the end, the director goes completely mad: the destruction of the Minsk ghetto was filmed in the form of a formalized expressionist mystery, with a wildly pigeon-like camera span along a complex trajectory, in the background it means that people are drowning, in the foreground – a completely naked blonde woman is running around and arguing with God" ([Volobuyev, 2008](#)).

However, Volobuyev's ironic enthusiasm once again confirms U. Eco: "Texts aimed at quite definite reactions of more or less definite readers (be they children, soap opera lovers, doctors, law-abiding citizens, representatives of youth "subcultures", Presbyterians, farmers, women from the middle class, scuba divers, pampered snobs or representatives of any other imaginary social and psychological category), are in fact open to all sorts of "erroneous" decodings" ([Eco, 2005: 19](#)).

Therefore, both the six-decade rejection of T. Ivanova's *Eastern Corridor* in 1968 and his stalk rejection by R. Volobuyev in 2008 does not cancel the opinion of A. Shpagin, which I share: "Valentin Vinogradov, an absolute heretic, who overtook his time the edict by thirty years. In Vinogradov's film *Eastern Corridor* the city occupied by the Germans is presented in the spirit of an absurd carnival, where all the usual signs and stereotypes are shifted from their places. Each action is twisted into nonsense, into chaos. And only a concentration camp has some semantic beginning – one can at least feel oneself in it among prisoners like you and try to escape – in an unclear and paranoid "freedom", where everyone suspects each other. "Give me another war! – One of the characters in the film shouts at the wall, and he or she is no longer able to figure out whether he or she is a stranger. Here is already such a detachment that the diva is given – something similar in the late 1960's you can see only in Czech cinema about the war!" ([Shpagin, 2005](#)).

A. Shpagin's quote contains inaccuracies. The mentioned character in the prison shouts out a much more dangerous phrase for censorship: "Give me a normal war! Without hostages! So that they do not beat off the bladder, so that living rats are not stitched up in the intestines!" This cry becomes even more acute in the context of the film because the *Eastern Corridor* opens with a frame quote of Field Marshal Keitel's order, calling the German army to the most brutal actions against Soviet soldiers and guerrillas precisely because they do not want to follow the rules of "normal war"...

The authors of the *Eastern Corridor* unequivocally assert that there is no "normal war", it is always inhumane, it always suppresses an individual with violence and fear. Undergrounders and guerrillas from the *Eastern Corridor* are afraid and suspicious of everyone and everyone, and are ready to destroy anyone – whether a man or a woman – with the slightest shadow of doubt...

Here comes the counterpoint with the chased voice of the announcer, which reads on the radio victorious reports on the exploits of the underground and guerrillas... But it's only on the radio all clear and simple – black and white, heroes-patriots and non human enemies...

In fact, there are also some Nazis, such as the prison governor, who are prone to ironic philosophical dialogues about the "executioner and the victim" with their prisoner-artist. These scenes are especially authentic because of the fact that the Nazi is played by the Lithuanian V. Akuraters, who has been in the service of both the German army and Stalinist camps... And among the guerrillas – such as Lobach (performed by R. Adomaitis, he here resembles something like Eugene Urbansky) – a stranger among all, suspected of treachery, he is powerfully and passionately moving towards the inevitable death...

Referring to the interpretation of the military theme in the cinema of the Czech "new wave", J. Lukeš correctly noticed the importance of demythologizing and disturbing motives in the films ...and the Fifth Rider is Fear (1964), Long Live the Republic (1965), Wagon to Vienna (1966), Diamonds of the Night (1964), etc. But "especially this influence is noticeable in the *Shop on the Square* (1966), whose directors Ján Kadár & Elmar Klos put the viewer in front of the principal dilemma of moral responsibility of a man who succumbed to the pressure of power ([Lukeš, 2002](#)). I believe that in the *Eastern Corridor* this problem was manifested with the same force: the pressure of the authorities (Nazi, Soviet, underground, etc.), reaching the apotheosis during any war, breaks the fates of the characters, each time forcing them to make a hard choice, sacrifice, but in the end still turning them into puppets of history...

In spite of accusations of cruel naturalism, the authors show even the most terrible scenes (terror, executions, torture) without any bloody and terrible details... At the same time, they do not lose at all in emotional impact. This is especially noticeable in the scene of the Holocaust – the mass extermination of Jews by the Nazis, drowning in the bubbling streams of water: no realistic details – it is a mystery of death and confrontation with it by prayer...

Yeah, the religious theme sounds desperately brave in the *Eastern Corridor*. The beautiful heroine played by Valentina Titova tells her sculptor husband that he looks like an apostle Peter (let us remind you that the one with the weakness of the spirit has denied Christ three times). However, after his wife's arrest by the Nazis, the sculptor did not flee to the partisans, believing

that this would betray his beloved woman. Showing Michelangelo's *The Last Judgment* to his friends, the sculptor finds there his "own" face – the face of a horrified sinner who no longer has the strength and will of God – neither to fight, nor to renounce, nor even to live...

Religious symbolism in the spirit of Renaissance painting is also noticeable in the compositions of many shots, especially in the cathedral and in the former church, which was turned into a granary.

With bitter irony and allusions towards the intellectuals of the sixties who lyrically praised the "commissars in dusty helmets", the collaborators are shown in the *Eastern Corridor*. And the editor-in-chief of the local newspaper, who probably wrote something pathos about a bright communist future a year ago. And an artistic bohemian adapting to the new regime...

A special place in the *Eastern Corridor* is occupied by female characters. Eerotically attractive, ready for self-sacrifice, they remain inaccessible (at least in the frame) for male characters...

Valentin Vinogradov uses music on the principle of total contrast. In Tariverdiev's melody there are light notes of hope, and despair reigns on the screen. When even an incredibly successful underground escape from the Gestapo office immediately turns out to be a fatal meeting with an old acquaintance who, it turns out, is under Nazi surveillance...

4. Results

Following the methods developed by U. Eco, I will distinguish three "series", or "systems", which are significant in the work: the ideology of the author, market conditions that determined his idea, the process of writing / creating, narrative techniques ([Eco, 2005: 209](#)). In my opinion, this approach is quite consistent with the method of analyzing media texts by C. Bazalgette ([Bazalgette, 1995](#)), based on such key words of media education as "media agencies", "media categories", "media technologies", "media languages", "media representations" and "media audience", as all these concepts are directly related to the ideological, market and structural and content aspects of the analysis of media works.

As an example of the analysis of the media text, let me take Valentin Vinogradov's art house film *Eastern Corridor* (1966), which was created contrary to the stereotypes of the Soviet cinematographic image of war. This will allow us to identify both the ideological, social, and historical context of the time when this film was created and its structure.

The authors' ideology in the socio-cultural context (dominant notions: "media agencies", "media representations", "media audience")

By the main authors of the media text in this case we will understand the director and screenwriter Valentin Vinogradov (1933-2011), screenwriter Ales Kuchar (1910-1996), cameraman Yuri Marukhin (1938-2001).

By the time the *Eastern Corridor* (1966) was created, the Soviet cinema had already accumulated a considerable base of works related to the topic of the Second World War (among the most notable ones was the *Secretary of the District Committee, She defends the Motherland*, *Zoya, Two Soldiers, At 6 p.m. after the war, The Fall of Berlin, The Feat of the Scout, The Star, Cranes Flying, The Living and the Dead, Ivan's Childhood, Calling for Fire on Me*, etc.), including films "guerrilla series", staged in Belarus (*Girl looking for her father, Through the cemetery*, etc.). Among them most often were dramas, but not so seldom – detectives, melodramas and even comedies.

The authors of the *Eastern Corridor*, contrary to the existing stereotypes, practically for the first time in the history of Soviet cinema have proposed a different ideological concept of the military theme: war as the destruction of the humanistic human beginning as a whole. Of course, already in *Ivan's Childhood* (1962) A. Tarkovsky (by the way, his was classmate of V. Vinogradov, whose future author of *Eastern Corridor* even played a role in the course work) piercingly sounded the motive of the devastating impact of the war on the psyche of the child. The authors of *Eastern Corridor* went further, convincingly proving that the war is a double-edged sword, crippling the souls and hearts of all parties involved in it...

Even the title of the movie is allegorical. It is known that Nazi Germany on the eve of the outbreak of World War II insisted that Poland gave it a "eastern corridor" 1 mile wide for free, extraterritorial communication with the Koenigsberg enclave. In 1939-1943, a kind of "eastern corridor" (apparently, to the world domination) for the Third Reich became not only Poland, but also a large part of Eastern Europe, including, of course, the Belarusian lands... On the other hand,

the Baltic States, the western part of Ukraine, Belarus and Poland both in 1939-1941, and in the war/post-war years were considered as the "eastern corridor" of the Soviet geopolitical force in Europe. Since 1945, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and other Eastern European countries have been included in this corridor (in the slightly softened regime of the "socialist camp countries").

Market conditions that contributed to the idea, the process of creating a media text (dominant concepts: "media agencies", "media categories", "media technologies", "media audience").

The philosophical parable *Eastern Corridor* was created in the times of the "thaw", when Soviet artists received, though dosed and under censorship, but still a "sip of freedom". Since film production (as well as other production) in the 1960s was entirely state-owned, the question of commercial profit from film distribution, although it was on the agenda, was not entirely dominating. There was a so-called state order for topics important for the state ideology, such as revolutionary, military, historical and biographical, etc. It is logical that within the framework of the military topic, not only action movie such as spy detectives *The Feat of the Spy* or *Far from the Homeland* were allowed, but also films that were not originally designed for the mass audience, but were significant for the annual "thematic plan".

Thus, one can be sure that the *Eastern Corridor* was in the thematic plan of the "Belarus-Film" studio on the usual section of guerrilla dramas telling about the heroism of the Soviet people during the occupation.

Structure and methods of narration in media text (dominant concepts: "categories of media", "media technologies", "media languages", "media representations").

By the time of the creation of the *Eastern Corridor* in addition to the ordinary, already forgotten today films, were put such outstanding films as *Cranes Flying* (1957) by M. Kalatozov and S. Urusevsky, *The Ballad of the Soldier* (1958) by G. Chukhray, *Ivan's Childhood* (1962) by V. Bogomolov, A. Tarkovsky & V. Yusov, *The Living and the Dead* (1963) by K. Simonov and A. Stolper. Each of these films punched a significant gap in the cinematic office of the stereotypes: The dramatic fate of the "wrong" from the point of view of the communist orthodox Veronica (*Cranes Flying*), the tragic image of the young front scout Ivan, who was deprived of childhood and turned into a ruthless vigilante (*Ivan's Childhood*), bitter episodes of the crushing defeat of the Soviet army in the summer of 1941 (*The Living and the Dead*)... However, even in these films, the traditional canons of clear separation of characters into positive and negative ones were not violated.

As S. Kuznetsov has correctly noticed, *Eastern Corridor* is a film about the guerrilla war in Belarus, looking at which you understand the Soviet censors who decided to protect the people entrusted to them from such a strong shock. This is not just another standard military movie with dashing shootings and good Leninist secretaries of the underground district committee, but a tough and frightening mystical picture in which not only such trifles as a traitor, but also the motives for the behavior of almost all the characters, acting as if in the field of unknown forces, guiding, transforming and, ultimately, killing them, remain unclear. A dark and mysterious film, some episodes of which are imprinted in memory forever in order to come up with an obsessive nightmare in a random trip (Kuznetsov, 1999). I should add that throughout the film the authors create an ambivalent feeling of ominous appearance and phantom unreality of action.

5. Conclusion

In my opinion, *Eastern Corridor* is the forerunner not only of A. German's guerrilla drama *Check on the roads* (1971), but also of his own fantasmagoric *Kristalev, the Car!* (1998). Moreover, in some episodes of Valentin Vinogradov's parable there are clear parallels with "Stars and Soldiers" (*Csillagosok, katonák*, 1967) by Miklós Jancsó and *The Death of the Gods* (*La caduta degli dei*, 1968) by Luchino Visconti with their fascinating plasticity and eroticism in the orchestration of violence.

I think if *Eastern Corridor* had been shown at any West European film festivals in the late 1960s, it almost certainly became the same triumphant, as *Cranes Flying* or *Ivan's Childhood*. But, alas... After the *Eastern Corridor* creative fate of Vinogradov clearly did not take shape. Outstanding directorial talent was not allowed to reveal itself, and he was forced to make film compromises, shooting "regular cinema" (*The Earthmen, White Dance*). Yuri Marukhin, a brilliant cameraman of the *Eastern Corridor*, shot several more films that were interesting in terms of their

visual solution (*The Tomb of the Lion*, *The Chronicle of the Night*), and then he also had a snooze and began to do something standard...

In recent years, Russia has produced many films and serials about the war. And the authors of these movies, not feeling the censorship of pressure, reveal to us the dramatic pages of the "fateful forties" ... But even against this background, seemingly forever forgotten and scolded, the *Eastern Corridor* today does not look outdated – neither in terms of film language nor in terms of problems. "Manuscripts", indeed, do not burn...

6. Filmography

Eastern Corridor (1966). Screenwriters: A. Kuchar, V. Vinogradov. Director: V. Vinogradov. Director of photography: Y. Marukhin. Composers M. Tariverdiev, E. Khagagortyan. Actors: R. Adomaitis, V. Plus, L. Abramova, V. Aslanova, V. Titova, E. Rysina, B. Markov, V. Akuraters, B. Babkauskas and others.

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